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A Poet's Declaration of Rights

cradled us and the breasts we sucked, for without feeling and experience, life is a void of living death.

Our fourth right is the life of creation. Out of all these other lives it springs, and it is greater than them all, for it looks beyond them.

We have each the right to these four lives. These are our rights and we must fight for them, for none are easy to attain. Yet no one has any right to more or less than these.

Only when we have attained them all can we become complete men and women. And when we have attained them for all men and women we shall be neither socialists nor supermen, but human beings, knowing and understanding humanity.

John Gould Fletcher

REVIEWS

JAPANESE POETRY

The Spirit of Japanese Poetry, by Yone Noguchi. E. P. Dutton & Co.

Japanese Lyrics, translated by Lafcadio Hearn. Houghton-Mifflin Co.

Japanese poetry, because of its brevity, is sometimes considered ephemeral and slight, even trivial—like those little Japanese gardens which the westerner appreciates as a toy, but whose deeper significance as a small mirror or reflection of nature is concealed from him.

Japanese poetry is never explanatory, its method is wholly suggestive; yet in its power to evoke associations, or to appeal

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to the imagination, it is profound rather than trivial. Brevity is occasioned by intensity. Nor is the effect of the Japanese *hokku* at all similar to that of the epigram as commonly conceived, which, like the serpent with its tail in its mouth, is a closed circle. As Mr. Noguchi says:

Although my understanding of that word (epigram) is not necessarily limited to the thought of pointed saying, I may not be much mistaken to compare the word with a still, almost dead, pond where thought or fancy, nay the water, hardly changes or procreates itself. The real *hokkus* are a running living water of poetry where you can reflect yourself to find your own identification.

In this little book Mr. Noguchi gives us many unintentional examples of the *hokku* in his way of expressing his thought; there is no dead phrasing. This in itself is a *hokku* in spirit:

A great *hokku* poem never makes us notice its limitation of form, but rather impresses us by the freedom through mystery of its chosen language, as if a sea-crossing wind blown in from a little window.

To appreciate Japanese poetry we must identify ourselves as much as possible with the vision of the Japanese poet and artist—the two arts are more intimately connected in the Japanese mind than with us. “The ancient sages said that a poem is a painting without visual shape, and a painting is poetry put into form.” To understand the deeper significance of Japanese poetry, indeed, we must go back to its foundations in the body of art and poetry produced during the Sung dynasty in China under the influence of Zen Buddhism —“this gentle Zen doctrine, which holds man and nature to be two parallel sets of characteristic forms between which

perfect sympathy prevails." We can then understand why, although we speak of Japanese poetry as suggestive, the word is not used, as in connection with certain French symbolist poets, to denote vagueness.

The following passage from Ernest Fenollosa's *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* gives us more than a glimpse into the mind of the Zen poet:

That such a doctrine (The Zen) should become a powerful adjunct of poetry . . . is due to its keen perception of analogies. All real poetry is just this underground perception of organic relation between things which custom classifies as different. This principle lies at the very root of the enlargement of vocabulary in primitive languages. Nature was so plastic and transparent to the eye of early man that what we call metaphor flashed upon him as a spiritual identity to be embodied at once in language in poetry and in myth. Zen only tried to get back to that primitive *éclaircissement*. A word, like a thing, means as much as you can see into it, and therefore lights up with a thousand chameleon-like shadings, which, of later days, only the poet knows how to use with a hint of the original color. So in Chinese poetry every character has at least two shades of meaning, its natural and its spiritual, or the image and its metaphorical range. In Chinese poetry we find extreme condensation, for every word is packed with thought. Hence, also, the parallelism goes on to couplets or stanzas, contrasted in their apparent, yet unlike in their real meanings.

It is clear, too, that such a doctrine must have a still more powerful influence over art. When Sung went to nature with *Zen*, it practically declared for landscape painting, a form that before had been used in art only sporadically. Sung and Tang are, *par excellence*, the epochs of landscape art, not only for China, but for the world. No such apotheosis of landscape has ever been vouchsafed to the west. Even in landscape poetry we ought to notice the lateness as well as the thinness of the stream that began to flow with Wordsworth. The Wordsworth of China lived more than a thousand years ago, and the idealistic "intimations" to which the English bard somewhat timidly gave a platonic form only hinted at, instead of unfolding, a system.

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The sounding cataract "haunted him like a passion," but what did it say to him? In our landscape art we were long satisfied with pretty backgrounds for saints; and even in Dutch landscape it was rather the peaceful suburbs of cities, or the rustic life of farms that greets us, not the free forms of nature in its violence and creative motion. The truth is that all through the Middle Ages the dualistic view of nature—wild nature—was essentially evil; the horror of grand rocks and lonely valleys, the hostility of matter to the heaven-directed human spirit, delayed the European perception of beauty in mountains and storms until the nineteenth century.

I do not know enough of the Japanese language to realize how much of the music or rhythm of the original may be lost in translation. Mr. Noguchi says, "When our Japanese poetry is best, it is, let me say, a searchlight or flash of thought or passion cast on a moment of life and nature, which, by virtue of its intensity, leads us to the conception of the whole; it is swift, discontinuous, an isolated piece." And I feel sure that the vivid sense of the originals is conveyed extremely well in many of the translations given by Mr. Noguchi and Lafcadio Hearn. Both translators are intelligent enough not to mar the effect of the original by attempting to recast it in rhyme and metre. It is interesting sometimes to see how the two men have translated the same poem. This, for instance, is a popular song of which the first version is Hearn's and the second Noguchi's:

Things never changed since the time of the gods—
The flowing of water, the way of love.

What does never change,
Since the days of the gods,
Is the way how a river runs:
What does never change

Japanese Poetry

Since the days of the gods,
Is the way how love flows.

The two following *hokkus*, which I cannot forbear quoting for the sake of the vivid pleasure they convey, recall Mallarmé's direction: "To be instituted, a relation between images, exact; and that therefrom should detach itself a third aspect, fusible and clear, offered to the divination."

When I saw the fallen flower return to the branch—
lo!—it was only a butterfly.

The second is a lament of a mother for her child:

The hunter of dragon-flies,
To-day how far away
May he have gone!

If the ideal of Japanese poetry, through its more intimate connection with the visual image, may have tended towards concentration and brevity, our western poetry may have tended towards verbosity through its greater dependence upon vocal rhythm—its greater inter-relation with music, with sound. The roots of the matter go back to the genesis of the two languages, one phonetic and the other ideographic, which it is impossible to do more than mention here. Mr. Noguchi, in explaining the nature of Japanese poetry, perforce contrasts it with English poetry, and his remarks are sometimes illuminating:

I come always to the conclusion that the English poets waste too much energy in "words, words, words," and make, doubtless with all good intentions, their inner meaning frustrate, at least less distinguished, simply from the reason that its full liberty to appear naked is denied. . . . My Japanese opinion, shaped by heredity, impulse and education, was terribly shattered quite many years ago when Edwin Markham's *The Man with a Hoe*

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made a furore in the American press. I exclaimed: "What! You say it is poetry? How is it possible?" It appeared to me to be a cry from the socialist platform rather than a poem; I hope I do not offend the author if I say that it was the American journalist whose mind of curiosity always turns, to use a Japanese expression, to making billows rise from the ground. . . . Before Edwin Markham there was Whittier, who sent out editorial volleys under the guise of poetry; it is not too much to say, I dare think, that *An American Anthology*, by Mr. Stedman, would look certainly better if it were reduced to one hundred pages from its eight hundred; we are bewildered to see so many poet-journalists perfectly jammed in the pages. One cannot act contrary to education; we are more or less the creation of tradition and circumstance. It was the strength of the old Western poets, particularly Americans, that they preached, theorized, and moralized, besides singing in their own days; but when I see that our Japanese poetry was never troubled by Buddhism or Confucianism [as such], I am glad here to venture that the Western poet would be better off by departing from Christianity, social reform and what not. . . .

I deem it one of the literary fortunes, a happy happening but not an achievement, that till quite recently our Japanese poetry was never annoyed, fatigued, tormented by criticism. . . . What I am thankful for is that it has never degenerated into mere literature; when the Western poetry is in the hand, so to say, of men of letters, the greatest danger will be found in the fact that they are often the prey of publication; it is true that the Western poets, minor or major, or what not, have had always the thought of printing from early date till today. . . . I have seen so many poets who only live between the covers and die when the ink fades away.

I have quoted these passages because I think the impression made upon the mind of a Japanese by our poetry assists us in forming our own conception of Japanese poetry.

Considering the importance of the oriental influence upon all western art of the last half century, an influence that is only now, curiously enough, beginning to make itself felt in

our literature, it is highly necessary that our conception of Japanese and Chinese poetry should be based upon a wider knowledge of originals. In a sense this widening of artistic boundaries is only a part of that general internationalizing of thought which many people hope will be, however indirectly, the one truly lasting victory of the European conflict. We need not venture to say what English poetry may gain from a possible infusion of oriental influence. It has gained much in the past from many derivative sources, all of which have contributed their share of richness and beauty to English verse. It is a mistake to judge poetry, even English poetry, as one critic recently insisted, only by English standards of comparison. We have yet to realize, as Ernest Fenellosa says, how much the alien is at the root of the national. Here in America influences pour in upon us from both sides. We may yet become the melting-pot of the arts, as well as of races.

For the student of comparative poetry, Yone Noguchi's little book will serve as a key to a vast store-house of treasure. The Japanese lyrics, translated by Lafcadio Hearn and reprinted conveniently in a single volume, have been selected from his many essays on the subject. So much is lost, however, of the fine flavor of Hearn's personal scholarship, that I think certain selections from the essays themselves should have been retained, or at least that a reference list of the essays from which the poems were taken should have been given.

A. C. H.